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ABSTRACT

This digest provides general information on the characteristics of English language learners (ELLs) in U.S. preschool and primary school programs and describes learning conditions and instructional practices that are most effective for educating young ELLs. The digest suggests that as young ELLs enroll in preschool and primary school programs in record numbers, educators must continually strive to provide effective, nurturing environments and developmentally and linguistically appropriate instruction for all learners. This instruction should take into consideration the characteristics of young English language learners and their language development, the learning conditions that are most effective for these learners, and the kinds of instruction that best meet their needs. (Author/VWL)

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Working With Young English Language Learners: Some Considerations

BRONWYN COLTRANE, CENTER FOR APPLIED LINGUISTICS

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Working With Young English Language Learners: Some Considerations

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In today's preschool programs and primary school classrooms, teachers are working with an increasingly diverse population of young students, including many who come from homes where English is not spoken. According to Kindler (2002), English language learners (ELLs) now represent 9.6% of all students enrolled in public pre-kindergarten through Grade 12 classes in the United States; 67% of these students are enrolled at the elementary school level. The growth in enrollment of English language learners is not restricted to big cities and urban areas; in fact, states with large rural areas, such as Georgia, Montana, and Mississippi, have experienced sharp increases in the enrollment of ELLs in their public schools. Teachers in preschool and primary education programs all over the country may have English language learners in their classrooms. Unfortunately, many teachers are not provided with specialized training in how to meet the needs of ELLs (Menken & Atunez, 2001) and may have no prior experience in teaching young students from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds.

This Digest provides general information on the characteristics of English language learners in U.S. preschool and primary school programs and describes learning conditions and instructional practices that are most effective for educating young ELLs.

Characteristics of Young ELLs

There are some important characteristics of young English language learners that may be useful for educators to keep in mind.

Young children's first language is not yet fully developed

As Chomsky (1969) demonstrated, children between 5 and 10 years old are still acquiring the structures of their first language. For children younger than 5, many aspects of their first language have not yet fully developed. So while older learners have the foundation of a fully developed first language when they begin acquiring a new language, younger English language learners are working toward two milestones at the same time: the full development of their native language and the acquisition of English.

While children are perfectly capable of acquiring two or more languages, and there is no evidence that this process produces any negative consequences—in fact, in many parts of the world it is the norm, rather than the exception, for children to grow up bilingual or multilingual (De Houwer, 1999)—educators must keep in mind that young children do not have a fully developed native language on which to base the learning of a second. Children may not know certain vocabulary words, grammatical structures, or other language features in their native language before they learn them in English, in which case merely translating a word or phrase may be of little help to them.

Children need to develop their native language(s) along with English

Educators must consider that young English language learners' primary mode of communication with their parents, extended families, and community members is their native language. Children are socialized into their communities, learn how to interact in socially appropriate ways, and receive nurturing and develop self-esteem through interactions with their parents and families. In order to develop their native language skills fully, young English language learners need support in both their native language and English. Ideally, those who work with young ELLs should be able to speak the native language(s) of the children. However, because many classrooms include children who speak a variety of languages and because bilingual teachers are not always available, this support may need to be provided by bilingual paraprofessionals or by parent and community volunteers. Children should be provided with opportunities for meaningful interaction in both languages, including verbal interaction and engagement with printed materials such as books and other media. In as many ways as possible, programs for young ELLs should support children's native languages.

Learning Conditions That Support Young ELLs

Learning English as an additive process

Preschool and elementary programs for English language learners should build on the premise that children's native languages are a valuable asset to be fostered. This kind of nurturing environment is critical to children's social and emotional development and fosters strong family connections as well as children's continued participation in the community. By collaborating with parents and others in the community, teachers can extend this nurturing environment into the school. Collaborations may include use of parent and community volunteers in the classroom to provide native language support to children, special classes or workshops to raise parents' awareness of the importance of supporting children's native languages at home, or family literacy programs that give parents and children the opportunity to learn together. Collaborations such as these, which promote native language development, help to ensure that children will continue to be able to communicate with their parents and extended families.

By valuing young English language learners' native languages and ensuring that learning English is an additive process—not one that results in the loss of the native language—programs can provide a nurturing, supportive environment for children, which can lead to improved self-esteem and help foster positive relationships with parents and communities.

Involving parents

Because parents are their children's primary teachers, it is essential for programs that serve young ELLs to build collaboration between parents and teachers. To this end, parents of young ELLs should be given frequent opportunities to provide input into their children's education. Teachers should share information with parents about the standards, curriculum, and instructional methods that are used in their child's class and help parents understand the results of various placement and achievement assessment measures that are used in the classroom. As Nissani (1990) points out, "the home and school should ideally work effectively together and support one another in the job of nurturing and educating young children" (p. 6).

The Nature and Quality of Instruction for Young ELLs

Ensuring teacher quality

It is essential to have well-prepared, qualified teachers in preschool and primary school programs that include English language learners. As Echevarria (1998) points out, teachers of young ELLs need to be able to understand their linguistic and other needs, prepare effective lessons that will meet those needs, provide appropriate instruction, and be able to assess how well students are comprehending what has been taught. Beyond that, teachers need a thorough understanding

of child development and how this may be applied to developmentally appropriate instructional design, sensitivity to the cultural backgrounds of the children and their parents, and skill in promoting positive home-school relationships.

Providing ample opportunities for planning

However well prepared and experienced an individual teacher may be in working with young English language learners, providing high-quality instruction and programming requires teamwork. Quality programs that serve young ELLs should involve extensive coordination and planning among staff. Too often, the planning time provided to teachers of English language learners is inadequate. In order to coordinate goals, align curricula, and ensure positive transitions for ELLs as they move through a program, adequate time for planning—including long-range planning that considers child development—is essential. When they are given sufficient time for collaboration and planning, teachers and others in programs that serve young ELLs may ensure that the instruction and goals they develop for these children are part of a well-articulated framework based upon practices that are developmentally appropriate, with long-term goals and achievement in mind.

Designing developmentally appropriate instruction

The kind of planning that teachers of young ELLs should be engaging in involves developmentally appropriate practice that takes into account the cognitive and social needs of young children. What Greenburg (1990) calls the cognitive/developmental approach is generally considered to be the most effective, as it considers what children may be able to do at various stages of development. This approach involves different types of learning, such as social learning, physical learning and play, emotional learning, and intellectual and academic learning. Nissani (1990) summarizes this approach as one in which "children are encouraged to become involved in purposeful and creative activities with other children; to make major choices among hands-on learning activities; to initiate and accomplish self-motivated tasks in a rich environment; and to construct knowledge at their own individual pace by discovering and engaging in open-ended activities that reflect all areas of their development" (p. 3). This kind of approach tends to be highly student centered and keeps children's developmental needs in mind by allowing them to learn at their own pace and in their own learning styles. It involves a great deal of creativity on the part of the teacher, who continually develops ways for children to interact in hands-on tasks and activities in which they may construct their own meaning through interaction.

Using funds of knowledge

In addition, teachers of young ELLs should tap into the funds of knowledge that parents and families possess and use this knowledge as a basis for instruction. For example, teachers should find out what kind of literacy practices, such as storytelling, are typically used in children's homes; what topics and subjects the child and family enjoy discussing together; traditions that are observed; and other areas of interest that may be brought into the classroom so that the knowledge base of children's families is respected and valued. Gathering this information can be done in a variety of ways, including informal discussions between teachers and parents, eliciting information from the learners themselves, visiting children's homes, and enlisting the help of community volunteers who may be familiar with children's home cultures. Once teachers have identified the kinds of knowledge, literacy practices, and traditions that exist in children's homes, this information may be integrated into classroom instruction (e.g., designing thematic units that include topics that children are familiar with, utilizing literacy practices that families employ in the home).

Within the context of supportive teachers who value students' home languages and native cultures and who actively involve students' parents in the instructional process, classrooms that utilize the cognitive/developmental approach provide young English language learners an enriching environment where they may construct knowledge—including knowledge of English—at their own pace and in a way that builds on their strengths. In this way, children's self-esteem is nurtured, and children are valued as individuals who are capable and full of potential.

Conclusion

As young ELLs enroll in preschool and primary school programs in record numbers, educators must continually strive to provide effective, nurturing environments and developmentally and linguistically appropriate instruction for all learners. This instruction should take into consideration the characteristics of young English language learners and their language development, the learning conditions that are most effective for these learners, and the kinds of instruction that best meet their needs.

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